

Parish Priests

By DENNIS J. GEANEY, O.S.A.

What do you expect from your parish priests? Do you expect a priest to be a holy man, a man of prayer, who pulls the congregation together in a sense of awe or joy as he reverently leads them in worship? Should he not be a man who can handle the scriptures deftly in the pulpit, a good administrator, a community leader, a good mixer with the poor and rich, young and old, men and women, Protestants, Jews, and non-believers, a man of good but simple tastes, a true man of God for all seasons and of all parts?

Frankly, I have known very few priests, in my lifetime, who would fit this description, but I am sure that I move in religiously or priestly deprived circles and that the priests in your area are different—learned, holy, sinless to an extraordinary degree, as one might expect priests should be.

Why should one not expect this kind of priest? He is one of God's anointed. He has been ordained for holy actions, to deal with the sacraments, to handle the Bread of Life and the Word of God. If he is ordained to preach the gospel, should one not expect him to lead the way and live it to the hilt? Is this unreasonable?

He has been given the sacrament of Holy Orders like married Catholics receive the Sacrament of Matrimony to help him live up to his holy calling? In the Western world, presently he

does not have a wife, children, and financial problems to distract him from the pure love of God. I am sure your priests are what you would expect from God's anointed, the real, holy, other-worldly, totally dedicated type, the kind you tip your hat to, before whom a man would never use, hell, or damn, or a woman would wear shorts or casual attire, the pious type, who would pick up his breviary and pray before the altar when a civil rights demonstration is going through his parish.

This is the ideal that was presented to us in the seminary. I have long since given it up.

I have found that the ideal had a pretty shaky scriptural foundation. St. Paul's classic description of the priesthood in Hebrews 5, takes a different track entirely. He says that the priest is one, "beset by sin." How can he say this about God's anointed? But, I guess that is what it means to be a man taken from among men.

What can you honestly expect from "a man taken from among men?" You can hardly expect any more from him than you can from your father, your brother, your husband, your son, the man who lives next door, or works at the next bench, or desk. If that is the case, can you really expect much? The trouble is that we are too much like you. We have our petty ways, our large conceits, our grudges, our obnoxious habits, our temper tantrums, and moody periods of silence.

If God continues to take his priests from among men who are beset with sin, just fasten your seat buckle and sit tight. Do not expect too much from the future crop of priests as long as they come from the same human race.

When a priest goes into the pulpit, what can you expect? Of course, he will adulterate the word of God. He will bring it to his biases from his cultural surroundings, his blindness in failing to see its obvious applications, his cowardice preventing it from being meaningful in a way that will hurt his standing with his lay and clerical friends. No priest ever preaches the gospel with the purity of Christ.

It might help, if in beginning with his homily, instead of saying, "My dear friends, here I am this morning, the same sorry bit of humanity. I am going to preach today on the words of Our Lord: 'Be you perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.' Don't laugh. You are no better than I am."

What about our seminaries? Should they not take the human clay we send them and reshape it into holy priests? It sounds good, but it is lacking in Pauline realism. Seminaries suffer from two major liabilities. One, the faculty are men who are beset by sin and perpetuate all the cultural and basic human weaknesses of mankind. Two, the seminary, as an institution, has a kind of built-in sinfulness. Its own weight seems to impede it from doing the job. It is true that Vatican II addressed itself to the seminary.

There are changes already and there will be more, but granted the human condition, do not expect too much.

All I can say to lay readers is, "This is the way we are." We are too much like yourselves. Will you take us the way we are?

No Negroes For Tea

Montgomery — (NC) — Four Negro women were denied entry to the Governor's Mansion here as they arrived with a group from the Mobile-Birmingham Diocesan Council of Catholic Women to attend a tea there.

Guards at the mansion turned away the four women, explaining their admission would be against the policy of the administration, which forbids integrated socializing at the mansion.



Monks Salvage Flood-Damaged Books

Grottaferrata, Italy — (RNS) — Monks of San Nilo Abbey in Grottaferrata are busy salvaging valuable ancient books and documents ruined by the rampaging flood waters of the Arno River in Florence. Here, Father Giampaolo Kurelo (left), head of the abbey's book restoration department, injects a volume with a formaldehyde solution to loosen the pages. Restoration of the books is a slow and complicated process and a challenge to the artistry of the monks.

Massive Hall Planned For Papal Audiences

Vatican City — (RNS) — A massive new hall for papal audiences is being built on a site facing the Janiculum Hill and close to St. Peter's Basilica.

To be finished in two years, the structure is being given a trapezoid shape to give maximum visibility and to assure the best possible acoustics. All planning has been designed to give an unobstructed view of the papal throne, focal point of the structure.

The hall will have seating accommodations for 11,000 persons and standing room for another 2,000. In addition, there will be 500 places on the throne level. If circumstances demand, the seats can be removed and 24,000 persons admitted.

There will also be several extra rooms, and some of these will be reserved for private papal audiences. Plans also call for a large room for meetings that will have a separate entrance.

Since it was almost impossible to find a suitable site near the Apostolic Palace, an area was chosen on the other side of St. Peter's, between the palace of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly the Holy Office), the Hospital of Santa Marta and the Pontifical German College.

Once the site was chosen, Pope Paul requested the well-known Italian architect, Pietro Nervi, to undertake the design and construction.

'Sell-Out' Feared On Schools

Bonn — (NC) — Catholic fears in West Germany's richest and most populous state that curbs on denominational schools may be the price the Christian Democrats have agreed to pay to maintain control of the North Rhine-Westphalia government have broken out into the open.

The Cologne archdiocese's paper has editorially confronted the minister president, Dr. Franz Meyers, with the question: Was the coalition between the Christian Democratic Union and the Free Democrat party made possible by a promise of the CDU to support the Free Democrats' plan for more non-denominational Christian schools and further restrictions on the number and influence of the denominational schools?

The victory of the Social Democrats in last July's elections brought about the coalition between the CDU and Free Democrats for control of the government. As it is, the Meyers government has only a two-way margin over the Social Democrats.

The Cologne Catholic newspaper pressed the government to express itself as to whether the Christian Democrats are willing to sacrifice the Christian schools for the sake of the uneasy control of the coalition presently provides.

The article pointed up the tension between Catholics and the Christian Democrats in North Rhine-Westphalia over the school question. The paper says Catholics are most concerned over what it regards as self-serving political maneuvering by the party and calls upon the CDU to take a more Christian position on issues.

Out in Canada

Ottawa — (NC) — Canadian Catholics are no longer obliged to abstain from meat on Fridays or during Lent as the result of action taken by this country's bishops during a week-long national conference here.

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Poverello of the Sahara

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at all cut off from the world but deeply involved in it at its poorest level.

This remains the cachet of the Petits Freres. Even now there are only about 250 of them (though there are nearly 1,000 Little Sisters with a similar vocation), but in 25 different countries they are to be found in the most depressed quarter of their chosen areas.

They work like the people around them; as a truck driver in Hamburg, as a fisherman in Concarneau, as a blacksmith in Marrakesh. It is a kind of work-priesthood, except that priests are rare here and the brothers do not wish to be mistaken for anything but the most ordinary people who can have an intense form of Christianity in the most unpromising circumstances. For the English fraternity in Leeds this means working separately in factories all day and becoming a religious community in the evening in a terraced house where the sound of next door's telly is liable to flavor vespers or break into the hour of meditation.

It means, as nearly as possible, being in a permanent condition of prayer, which Voillaume defines as "think of our Lord with loving attention." It seems, on the surface, a pretty bleak existence, and the brothers themselves do not detect any spiritual growth in the neighborhood as a result of their presence.

The world might reasonably think this a fruitless pursuit of the ideal if it were not that the religious life as a whole is being moved by it. A number of things are making for change in the monastic and other communities today; the philosophy and example of the Little Brothers and Sisters is one of the most potent. Rene Voillaume's books — "Seeds of the Desert" (Burns and Oates) and "Brothers of Men" (Darton, Longman and Todd) — must by now be required reading in most communities.

In Benedictine and Trappist monasteries like young monks are patently under their influence. At the very least Voillaume's work is causing them to revise their own inadequate ideas of holy poverty; it is also making them review the old monastic tension between contemplation and demonstrating love to the world outside.

It is possible that these things would have happened if there had been no Charles de Foucauld. But there was, and he can now be seen as a turning point in the history of the religious life, just as Benedict, Francis, and Egnatius were before him.

His life has not yet made more than a speck of difference to the world at large. But his influence is now drifting through a great and potentially the most mobile segment of Christendom. And so there is no telling where it may end.

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